Perceptions and Attributions for Intimate Violence:

The Roles of Sex, Size, and Severity

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Abstract

A well-replicated research finding is that incidents of male perpetuated intimate violence are perceived more negatively than incidents of female intimate violence. This research investigated the role of size and strength differences between men and women, which might explain this finding. A hundred and sixty-three participants watched a videotaped scenario in which the sex of the assailant and the victim, the size of the assailant and the victim, and the severity of the violence were systematically manipulated. The influences of participants' sex, general attitudes toward relationship violence, and experience of violence were also investigated. Results generally supported predictions. First, assailants' were perceived more negatively than victims. Second, male assailants' behaviour was perceived as aggression rather than as horseplay, and they were blamed more than female assailants. Third, male victims' behaviour was perceived as aggression rather than as horseplay, and they were blamed more than female victims. Fourth, relationship predictions were more negative when scenarios involved a male assailant and a female victim. Fifth, size differences failed to influence perceptions in a systematic way. Thus, size differences did not moderate the standard findings concerned with sex. Sixth, when violence was severe (compared to minor), assailants' behaviour was rated as more aggressive and as horseplay to a lesser extent, and relationship predictions were more negative. Results and implications are discussed.

Introduction

A woman punches a man in the stomach and pours a glass of beer over his head. This kind of scenario is often used as a form of light relief on TV shows and in films, and provokes laughter. A man punches a woman in the stomach and pours a glass of beer over her head. This type of scenario is likely to be reacted to with horror, revulsion or concern.

Why is the same act of aggression perceived quite differently depending on the sex of the assailant and the victim? Previous research is surprisingly uninformative in answering such a basic question. One possibility is that people have different attitudes toward male and female violence because of an ancient chivalry norm that forbids violence towards women. A second possibility is that attitudes differ because men are physically stronger and bigger than women, and are thus more likely to inflict greater injury. This research investigates whether the existence of size and strength differences between the sexes lead to different attitudes toward male and female intimate violence, or whether there remain residual effects of gender stereotypes and associated norms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that size differences may be influential, with participants in one study commenting that 'A wife can...hit her husband because she is smaller and can get away with it' and 'Most women...can go ahead and hit their husbands without hurting them' (Greenblat, 1983, p. 254).

Numerous studies show that people tend to disapprove of male violence within intimate relationships, while they tolerate female violence (e.g. Arias & Johnson, 1989). Uncovering the explanations for these differences in attitudes is not a purely theoretical exercise. Programmes aimed at changing the acceptability of different forms of intimate

violence may be more effective if they were based on a sound understanding of the causes of such differences in attitude. If the relative size and strength of assailants and victims profoundly influence perceptions of intimate violence, for example, this would need to be taken into account in any media campaign aimed at ameliorating or preventing intimate violence. Attitudes, beliefs and behaviour interact in a complex rather than a dual fashion. Nevertheless, changing attitudes toward intimate violence can influence peoples' tendency to inflict violence in intimate relationships.

This research investigated whether size and strength differences between the sexes explain the different attitudes toward male and female intimate violence. To accomplish this goal, perceivers were shown videotaped interactions that systematically manipulated the size and sex of the assailants and victims within close relationship contexts. The severity of the violence was also manipulated, with perceivers watching either a minor incident of violence or a more severe one.

I will now discuss research on intimate relationship violence in general, then deal with the research specifically relating to attributions and perceptions of violence. I will then discuss the influence of individual differences on perceptions of violence before finally turning to the hypotheses of the current study.

Intimate Relationship Violence

Physical aggression in intimate relationships is a disturbing and common reality. New Zealand data suggest that prevalence rates here are similar to other western countries, with 20-30% of couples reporting engaging in minor violence (e.g. pushing

and shoving) and 5-20% of couples reporting engaging in severe violence (e.g. kicking and punching) (Magdol et al., 1997).

Surprisingly, both genders report equal frequencies of violence against their intimate partners (Fletcher, 2002). A meta-analysis by Archer (2000) of over eighty studies examining the extent of violence in intimate relationships found that women engage in slightly higher levels of violence than men. New Zealand data follow this trend, with women reporting slightly higher perpetration rates and lower victimisation rates than men (Magdol et al., 1997). Not surprisingly, the finding that women perpetrate equal or slightly higher levels of intimate violence than men has been met with extensive opposition.

Several criticisms have been aimed at the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) used in many of these studies. It has been dismissed as unreliable; however, it is both internally consistent and consistent over time (Fletcher, 2002). Opponents have argued that the results are an artefact of under-reporting. However, the same results are found whether male or female reports are used, and whether reports of victimisation or perpetration are used. Such consistent results are unlikely to have been produced by under-reporting (Fletcher, 2002). The CTS has also been accused of being invalid; i.e. that it is a poor measure of interpersonal violence. However, the CTS does appear to measure intimate violence reasonably well. There is good partner agreement about overall levels of relationship violence (e.g. Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993) and the results of the CTS predict behaviour quite strongly, for example, criticism during arguments (Babcock et al., 1993) and divorce (Lawrence & Bradbury, in press).

Another argument is that women are simply defending themselves against violent men. Because the CTS does not measure the context of violent acts, it is claimed that women tend to be victims of male violence, and the violence they report is simply self-defence. However, research shows that women report initiating intimate violence at least as often as men do (DeMaris, 1992). Thus, it appears that self-defence does not fully explain the finding that women and men engage in equal levels of intimate violence.

However, men do have the ability to inflict more injury than women, simply as a function of their generally greater size and strength. Indeed, the likelihood of intimate violence perpetrated by men causing serious injury is about six times higher than for women (Straus, 1993). For example, women admitted to hospital are much more likely to have injuries inflicted by a partner than men (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). Because women suffer more serious injuries as a result of intimate violence than men, and because of media coverage and public campaigns, the victimisation of women may be more tangible and obvious to the general public than that of men (Cook & Harris, 1995). Thus, it is hardly surprising that intimate male violence is perceived much more negatively than intimate female violence, and that people think that it occurs much more frequently.

Sex and Size of Assailants and Victims

The research reviewed here investigates the perceptions of uninvolved relationship outsiders (strangers), although there is a body of research examining perceptions of violent incidents by those involved (e.g. Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1993; Senchak & Leonard, 1994). Research examining perceptions of both male and female violence in intimate relationships finds consistent trends with respect to the sex of the

assailant, regardless of the dependent variables measured. People evaluate male violence more negatively (Arias & Johnson, 1989), more seriously (Feather, 1996) and as less acceptable and more criminal (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993) than female violence. Male assailants are considered more responsible for their behaviour than female assailants (Feather, 1996; Harris & Cook, 1994). People report feeling more positive affect and more sympathy towards female assailants than male assailants (Feather, 1996). Male assailants are also disliked more than female assailants (Harris & Cook, 1994). Moreover, people feel more strongly that the assailant should be convicted if male rather than female (Harris & Cook, 1994).

These findings are not restricted to studies looking at heterosexual couples. One study comparing heterosexual, lesbian and gay relationships found that acts carried out by men were judged to be more violent and more abusive than the same acts carried out by women, regardless of the type of relationship (Carlson, 1999). However, a male hitting a female is seen as more violent, and people report being more likely to call the police, than either the reverse or when a gay man hits his male partner (Harris & Cook, 1994).

Studies looking at the sex of the *victim* have also produced consistent results. Male victims are attributed more blame for the abuse (Lehmann & Santilli, 1996), and are held more responsible (Harris & Cook, 1994) than female victims. Female victims are seen as needing more recourse and redress than male victims (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993). People feel more strongly that female victims should leave the relationship for good compared to male victims (Harris & Cook, 1994). Furthermore, when incidents involve female victims they are rated as more abusive and violent than when they involve male

victims, regardless of whether heterosexual, lesbian or gay relationships are the focus (Carlson, 1999).

These findings are typically explained in terms of dominant gender stereotypes. Men are seen as aggressive, assertive and dominant; whereas women are seen as passive, accommodating and submissive. Aggression performed by females is more acceptable, because it is seen as less harmful (Harris, 1991). Female victims are seen as living in an undesirable situation, whereas male victims are held accountable for their own abuse (Lehmann & Santilli, 1996). Stereotypes about intimate violence are also drawn upon in explaining differences in perceptions of male and female aggression (Harris & Cook, 1994). Media and public awareness campaigns have focused on male to female violence in intimate relationships. This means that men have come to be seen as the 'typical' assailants and women as the 'typical' victims in violent intimate relationships by the general population.

However, these findings have one limitation in common: all the research conducted to date on perceptions of specific intimate violence incidents has utilised written vignettes. Participants read a short written description of a violent incident and then answer questions about it. The variables of interest (such as the sex of the assailant) are manipulated within the written scenarios by changing a few words, such as altering the assailant's name from 'Steve' to 'Sarah'. Thus, the finding that male intimate violence is judged more negatively than female intimate violence could be produced by factors other than the assailant's sex. I will discuss two such factors - the likelihood of causing injury and size.

Injury levels have been found to predict perceptions of violent scenarios. Arias & Johnson (1989) found that those forms of violence likely to produce severe physical injury are evaluated more negatively than lesser forms. As injurious outcomes increase, abusiveness and violence ratings also increase (Carlson, 1999). Furthermore, research on intimate male violence has found that when an injury following a violent exchange is explicit and severe, the incident is viewed more negatively (Miller & Bukva, 2001; Pierce & Harris, 1993).

Males may reasonably be seen as likely to cause more injury than females in violent exchanges. Thus, when reading the scenarios, participants may make implicit assumptions about the amount of injury that is caused. Indeed, research shows that male assailants are seen as inflicting more physical and emotional harm than female assailants (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993). This may explain why male violence is perceived more negatively than female violence.

In addition, males may plausibly be perceived as larger and stronger then females. When people read a scenario, they probably make implicit assumptions regarding the respective size of the male and female. The image of a large man hitting a small women may well be judged negatively, with associated connotations of bullying a (helpless) victim. Alternatively, a small woman hitting a large man could be seen as less serious or even humorous because the man is unlikely to be hurt. Male victims may also be judged more negatively than female victims because they should be able to easily defend themselves due to their greater size and strength.

This research attempts to unravel the relative contributions of the sex and size both of the assailant and the victim on perceptions and attributions of a violent incident.

To accomplish this, a large female actor was paired with a small male actor, and a large male actor was paired with a small female actor, in separate violent videos (with each couple following the same script). This was intended to emphasise size differences between the actors. Each actor performed the role of the assailant in one video, and the victim in another video. The level of injury was made explicit (there were no obvious physical injuries). These videos then formed the stimulus materials in the experiment proper.

Severity of Violence

There is a big difference between lightly pushing or shoving a partner during an argument, and heavily punching and kicking them repeatedly in a vicious fashion. Johnson (1995) has made a distinction between 'common couple violence' and 'intimate terrorism'. Common couple violence involves minor acts, like pushing or slapping, that are likely to be mutual. Most intimate violence in population samples is common couple violence. Intimate terrorism (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000), involves more severe and serious violence like punching or kicking, is more likely to result in injury and reflects a pattern of control. Research investigating crime statistics or shelters for women probably taps into this type of violence.

Johnson (1995) argues that distinguishing between these two types of violence helps explain why studies of the general population show high levels of both male and female intimate violence, whereas other evidence (e.g. from women's shelters and hospitals) shows much higher perpetuation by men than by women. It is also important to

distinguish between these two kinds of violence as they may be viewed quite differently by outsiders.

Perceptions of intimate violence may (quite plausibly) differ according to the severity of the violence, and could interact with the other variables such as the sex of the assailant and victim. Arias and Johnson (1989) found that male and female use of severe violence was rated more negatively than minor violence, and others have found that severe acts of intimate violence are rated as more abusive and violent than minor acts (Carlson, 1999). Studies looking at only male intimate violence have found similar trends, with severe violence considered more serious (Miller & Bukva, 2001) and with the assailant being blamed more (Wandrei & Rupert, 2000) than when violence is minor.

The severity of intimate violence may moderate the extent to which the sex of the assailant and the victim, and the size of the assailant and the victim, influence perceptions and attributions. When violence is minor, sex and size will probably be less influential as size and strength differences may not be as important in incidents involving, for example, a push or a slap. However, when violence is severe, the sex and size of the assailant and victim should exert a strong influence. These possibilities will be explored in the current research by manipulating the severity of the violence in the videotaped interactions. In general, I expect to find interactions between the severity of the violent incident and sex and/or size of the assailants and victims.

Individual Differences in Perceptions and Attributions

Past experiences, attitudes and beliefs may well influence the way people perceive violent scenarios. Factors chosen for inclusion in this research were the sex of the

respondent, attitudes toward violence, and experience of violence. I will discuss each factor in turn.

Sex of Respondent and Attitudes Toward Violence. Past research has explored whether men and women differ in their perceptions and attributions of specific intimate violent incidents. Studies looking at only male intimate violence have had clear and consistent results. Women tend to judge violent incidents more negatively than men do, and are more likely to blame the male assailant and sympathise with the female victim (Drout, 1997; Hillier & Foddy, 1993; Locke & Richman, 1999; Pierce & Harris, 1993).

The results of these studies are relatively easy to explain. Because the sex of the assailant and the victim is not systematically varied, women may simply be sympathising with the female victim with whom they identify. Men, in turn, probably identify and sympathise more with the male assailant.

Studies looking at specific incidents of both male and female perpetuated intimate violence have produced more mixed results. Some have found that there are no, or few, differences between male and female respondents in their judgements (Arias & Johnson, 1989; Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Beyers, Leonard, Mays, & Rosen, 2000; Harris, 1991; Stewart & Maddren, 1997). Others have found evidence of some same-gender favouritism, with women (compared to men) judging the female assailant as deserving a penalty less, reporting less positive affect about a female penalty, and reporting more sympathy for the female assailant (Feather, 1996).

Some studies have found that women react more negatively to specific intimate violent incidents than men, regardless of the sex of the assailant and the victim. Harris and Cook (1994) reported that women (compared to men) were more likely to judge an

incident as violent, call the police, like the victim, and think the victim should leave the relationship. Carlson (1999) found that women were more likely than men to label the depicted incident as abusive and violent. Cook and Harris (1995) found that men found a violent exchange more humorous than women did. In general, therefore, the evidence regarding sex differences in perceptions of specific intimate violent incidents is mixed.

Research examining attitudes toward violence in general, rather than examining specific incidents of aggression, may shed some light on these conflicting findings. This research has found that women tend to have more negative attitudes toward intimate violence than men (Funk, Elliot, Urman, Flores, & Mock, 1999; Harris & Cook, 1994; MacIntyre & Cantrell, 1995; Smith, Ellis, & Benson, 2001). This generalisation may explain why, in some studies looking at specific violent incidents, women (compared to men) are found to have more negative perceptions, regardless of the sex of the assailant and the victim. Perhaps general attitudes toward intimate violence mediate the link between the sex of the respondent and perceptions of a specific violent incident. When general attitudes toward intimate violence are controlled for, the difference between men and women's responses to specific violent incidents may disappear. This possibility will be explored in the current research.

Experience of Intimate Violence. Past experience of intimate violence may also influence judgements of violent incidents. Results in this area are, however, mixed.

Some research has found that past experience of intimate violence (as a victim or as an assailant) is unrelated to perceptions of intimate violence scenarios. Bethke and DeJoy (1993) investigated participants' judgements of the amount of injury caused, the responsibility for the incident, the appropriateness of the act, the possibility of future

violence and the criminality of the incident. They found no differences between those with and without experience on any of the variables. Beyers and colleagues (2000) investigated participants' judgements of the typicality of the incident, the existence and severity of abuse, the deservingness of the victim, and the likely effect on the relationship. They also found no differences in judgements between those participants with and without experience of intimate violence.

However, other research has found that past experience of intimate violence does influence judgements. For example, Arias and Johnson (1989) found that those who reported a more extensive history of intimate violence (as assailant or victim) judged violent incidents less negatively than those without such experience.

Those who have had more experience of intimate violence have less negative general attitudes toward intimate violence than those with less experience (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Funk et al., 1999). These attitudes in turn may influence responses to a specific violent incident. Therefore, I propose a mediational model, with greater past experience of violence being related to less negative attitudes toward intimate violence, which in turn influence judgements of a specific violent incident.

Current Research

Independent Variables

The present research addresses problems in prior research related to injury levels and size differences between men and women. Videotaped violent exchanges were used to control the amount of injury caused and to systematically vary the links between sex

and size. Because this is an experimental design, sex, size and assailant/victim status were independently manipulated. Severity of violence was also manipulated in order to explore the differences between minor and severe forms of violence. I predicted that both sex and size would independently predict judgements, but would interact with the severity of the violence.

In the hypotheses outlined below, 'negativity' refers to the extent that actors' behaviour is rated as dangerously aggressive rather than as horseplay, and the actor being blamed more and held more responsible. Regarding the assailants and victims, I predicted that:

1. Assailants would be judged more negatively than victims.
2. Assailants would be judged more negatively when violence was severe than when it was minor.
3. Male assailants would be judged more negatively than female assailants.
4. Large assailants would be judged more negatively than small assailants.
5. Victims would be judged less negatively when violence was severe than when it was minor.
6. Male victims would be judged more negatively than female victims.
7. Large victims would be judged more negatively than small victims.

In addition to measuring participants' perceptions of the actors, I also asked participants for predictions about the relationship between the actors. Consistent with hypotheses regarding the individuals, I predicted that:

1. Relationship predictions would be more negative when violence was severe than when it was minor.

2. Relationship predictions would be more negative when the assailant was male (and the victim female) than when the assailant was female (and the victim male).
3. Relationship predictions would be more negative when the assailant was large (and the victim small) than when the assailant was small (and the victim large).

Interactions between severity of violence, sex and size were also predicted. The main effects outlined above regarding the sex and size of the assailants and victims were expected to be stronger in the severe violence incidents than in the minor violence incidents.

Individual Differences

Figure 1 outlines a path analytic model showing how the individual difference variables were expected to influence the dependent variables.

It was predicted that male and female participants would respond differently to the dependent variables. Males, compared to females, were expected to rate the assailant less negatively and to rate the victim more negatively. Males were also expected to have less negative predictions about the relationship in general. However, males were also expected to have less negative attitudes toward intimate violence in general than females. In turn, people with less negative attitudes toward violence were expected to judge the violent scenarios less negatively than people with more disapproving attitudes. When attitudes were controlled for, it was expected that the sex differences in judgements of the violent scenarios by men and women (the dotted arrow in Figure 1) would disappear.

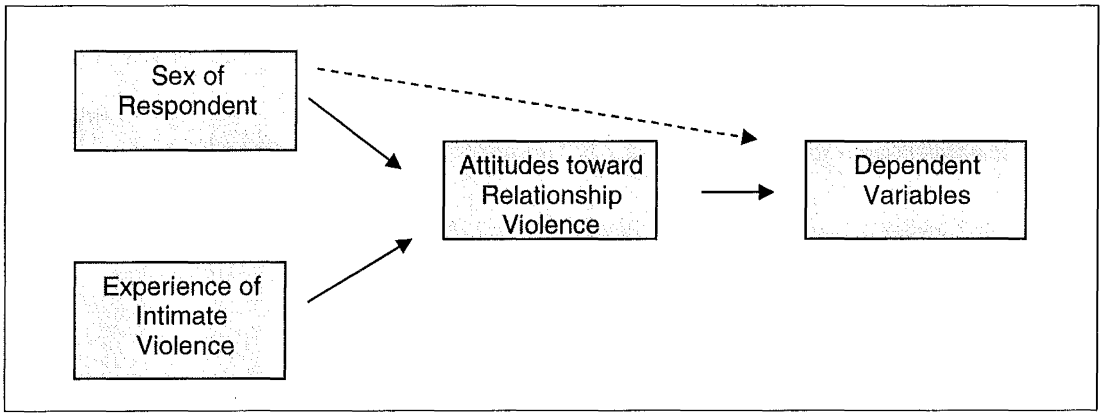

Figure 1: **The relationship between individual difference variables and dependent variables**

Based on past research, experience of intimate violence was expected to be positively correlated with attitudes toward intimate violence. As shown in Figure 1, attitudes toward violence were proposed as a mediating variable between experience of intimate violence and judgements of the violent videotape.

Method

Participants

Participants were 81 men and 82 women who ranged in age from 17 to 49 years, with a mean age of 22.8 years (*SD* = 5.8). They were predominantly students from the University of Canterbury (95.7%). Participants identified with a variety of different ethnicities: 73.6% were European/Pakeha, 14.1% were Asian/Chinese, 4.3% were Maori/Pacific people, 2.5% were Indian and 5.5% were classed as 'Other'. Of the sample, 57.1% were involved in a relationship of some kind, 66 were dating, 11 were living together and 16 were married. The length of these relationships ranged from two weeks to 29 years with a mean length of 26.3 months (*SD* = 50.7).

Materials

Videotaped Scenarios

Three-minute videotaped scenarios were recorded for use in this research. Although scripts were identical, a violent incident at the end of the scenario was manipulated in terms of the sex of the assailant (female or male), the size of the assailant (small or large) and the severity of the violence (minor or severe).

The script was designed to be ambiguous. The couple began by discussing the television programme they were watching. They then went on to discuss one another flirting with other people. It was intended that the discussion could be interpreted either as 'joking around' or as a serious argument. In this way, the violent incident at the end of the video was ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The four actors used in these videos were in a similar age group (19 - 22 years) and were judged by the researcher to be average in appearance. They wore plain, neutral clothing (blue/black trousers and white tee-shirts). The large male (182cm, 85kg) and the small female (160cm, 52kg) acted together as a couple, as did the large female (177cm, 80kg) and the small male (174cm, 62kg). This way, relative size and strength differences were emphasised. Each actor performed the role of the assailant in one incident and the victim in one incident. This led to four different videotaped incidents.

The violent incident consisted of the assailant pushing the victim onto a couch and then punching and kicking them. For the minor condition, the videos were edited and cut after the push onto the couch; for the severe condition, the full incident including punching/kicking was shown. This produced eight different videotaped versions of the scenario.

Dependent Variables

Questions were created by the researcher or taken from other research looking at this topic (Cook & Harris, 1995; Feather, 1996; Harrison & Willis, 2000).

Horseplay Ratings. The behaviour of the man and the woman in each condition was rated on the following adjectives: teasing, playing around, light-hearted, humorous, and entertaining. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the descriptions matched the actors' behaviour on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'not at all' and 'very much'). Participant responses were coded in terms of the assailant and the victim rather than the sex of the person they were rating. These ratings showed good internal reliability for the assailants' and the victims' behaviour, both with alphas of 0.84. Item total

correlations were also acceptable for assailant ratings (0.56 - 0.72) and victim ratings (0.52 - 0.75). These items were therefore averaged to produce overall 'horseplay ratings' of the assailant and the victim.

Aggression Ratings. The behaviour of the man and the woman in each video was rated on the following adjectives: violent, aggressive, dangerous, controlling, and nasty. Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the descriptions matched the actors' behaviour on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'not at all' and 'very much'). Participant responses were coded in terms of the assailant and the victim rather than the sex of the person they were rating. These ratings showed good internal reliability for the assailants' and the victims' behaviour, with alphas of 0.85 and 0.78. Item total correlations were also acceptable for assailant ratings (0.42 - 0.75) and victim ratings (0.43 - 0.58). These items were therefore averaged to produce overall 'aggression ratings' of the assailant and the victim.

Blame Attributions. Participants answered four questions about the man and the woman in the video on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'strongly disapprove/not at all' and 'strongly approve/very much'). The questions asked about approval of the man/woman's actions (reverse coded), how much they liked the man/woman (reverse coded), to what extent the man/woman was to blame for the incident, and whether the man/woman was justified in his/her actions (reverse coded). Participant responses were coded in terms of the assailant and the victim rather than the sex of the person they were rating. These scales tapping attributions to the assailant and the victim showed good internal reliability with alphas of 0.68 and 0.75, and good item-total correlations (assailant items = 0.35 - 0.52; victim items = 0.38 - 0.64). The items were averaged to

produce two variables: 'blame attributions to assailant' and 'blame attributions to victim'. Higher scores indicated more blame.

Negative Predictions about Relationship. Participants were asked questions regarding the relationship of the couple in the video, and again rated their agreement on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'not at all/not likely/very happy' and 'very much/very likely/very unhappy'). They were asked whether the man should leave the woman, whether the woman should leave the man, how likely it was that the relationship would break-up in 6-12 months, and how unhappy the relationship was. The internal reliability alpha for this scale was 0.71, and item total correlations ranged from 0.42 to 0.57. Therefore, the items were averaged to form a 'negative predictions about relationship' score.

Individual Difference Measures

Attitudes toward Violence. Attitudes toward physical violence were measured using a modified version of the Attitudes toward Dating Violence Scales developed by Price and Byers (1999). This scale is internally consistent and has good construct and criterion-related validity (Price & Byers, 1999). The Attitudes toward Male and Female Physical Violence subscales were used. The revised scale contains 10 statements for male and female intimate violence (20 items in total). It includes three items about 'hitting', five items about 'slapping' and two items about 'pushing/shoving'. Participants indicated on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree') the degree to which they agreed with each statement. Examples of items include 'A man/woman should break up with a woman/man when she/he hits him/her' and 'Men/women who

cheat on their partners deserve to be slapped'. Order of presentation of the statements measuring male and female violence was counter-balanced. The attitudes toward female violence scale was internally reliable with an alpha of 0.83 and good item total correlations (0.32 - 0.70), as was the attitudes toward male violence scale (alpha = 0.80; item total correlations = 0.31 - 0.64). The ten items in each scale were averaged to create an overall score for attitudes toward female violence and attitudes toward male violence. These two composite scores were positively and significantly correlated ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) so they were averaged to form an overall 'attitudes toward violence' score for each participant. Higher scores denoted more accepting attitudes toward intimate violence.

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). Participants' experience of intimate relationship violence was measured using a version of the Conflict Tactics Scale developed by Straus (1979). This scale has been found to be internally reliable and reliable using overall indices of violent aggression (Fletcher, 2002). It also predicts behaviour such as arguing and divorce among couples (Babcock et al., 1993; Lawrence & Bradbury, in press). Participants completed two versions of the scale; one for their own violence and another for their partners' violence. The CTS asks about the frequency of various forms of conflict behaviour, ranging from 'discussed an issue calmly' through to 'used a knife or fired a gun'. Participants were asked to fill out the CTS about their current relationship or a previous relationship. Three participants had never been in a relationship before, therefore only 160 participants filled out the CTS. Minor violence items ($n = 8$) and severe violence items ($n = 8$) were then averaged to make four scores: minor-self, minor-partner, severe-self, and severe-partner. These scores (particularly the severe ratings) were positively skewed, so a log transformation was conducted to make the distributions

more normal. These scores were then standardised into z-scores in order to place minor violence (high frequency ratings) and severe violence (low frequency ratings) on the same scales. The resultant scores were all positively and significantly correlated ($r = 0.41$ - $0.72, p < 0.01$). Therefore, they were added together to make one overall 'experience of violence' score. Higher scores meant more experience of intimate violence.

This procedure differs from that used in other research using the CTS, which tends to simply add together the frequency ratings of all violence, minor and severe. However, this method reduces the influence of severe violence, which tends to have low frequency ratings, and exaggerates the influence of minor violence, which tends to have high frequency ratings. Standardising the two forms of violence and putting them on the same scales before adding them together gives both forms of violence an equal weighting, leading to a more accurate measure of relationship violence. This is still a conservative measure, as severe violence is given the same weighting as minor violence, when in fact it is probably more revealing as to overall intimate violence levels.

Manipulation Check

Participants rated the following question on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 (end points 'not serious' and 'very serious'): 'How serious was the incident in the video?' This was a manipulation check to ensure that participants perceived the severely violent incidents as more serious than the minor ones.

Procedure

The research was conducted in a research laboratory at the University of Canterbury. Participants were informed that they were taking part in research about 'perceptions of personal interaction'. After giving consent, participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their participation. They were then told they were going to watch a video of a couple interacting, and were given the following instructions: 'Watch this video as if it is happening in real life. Imagine you are watching from another room or through a two-way mirror'. Participants then viewed one of the eight videotaped scenarios. After giving demographic information, participants completed the dependent variables outlined above. They then filled out the Attitudes toward Male Violence and Attitudes toward Female Violence scales and the Conflict Tactic Scale for themselves and their current or previous partner (these two types of questionnaires were counter-balanced within each condition). Questionnaires were placed by participants in a locked box. Participants were then debriefed as to the true nature of the research and were paid $5.00.

Results

Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was used to test the hypothesis that participants perceived the severely violent incidents as more serious than the minor ones. A t-test showed that the severe incidents ($M = 4.66$) were rated significantly more seriously than the minor incidents ($M = 4.02$), $t\,(1,161) = 3.27, p < 0.001$.

Horseplay Ratings

The behaviour of the assailant and the victim in each condition was rated on the following adjectives: teasing, playing around, light-hearted, humorous and entertaining. The mean score of these ratings made up the overall 'horseplay ratings' score for the assailant and the victim in each scenario. This scale was internally reliable, as were all the subscales analysed here (see Method section). Ratings of the assailant and the victim were analysed separately, rather than in one analysis, because they were confounded with the sex of the assailant. This is the case for all further analyses reported here. However, differences between assailants and victims were analysed separately using dependent t-tests.

Ratings of the assailant were analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (female assailant vs. male assailant) × 2 (small assailant vs. large assailant) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 1. The analysis revealed main effects for severity of violence, $F(1, 155) = 3.92, p < 0.05$; sex of assailant, $F(1,155) = 97.95, p < 0.001$; and size of assailant, $F(1,155) = 7.25, p < 0.01$. Following predictions, assailants' behaviour was rated as horseplay to a greater extent when violence was minor ($M = 3.52$) than when

it was severe ($M = 3.21$); and female assailants' behaviour ($M = 4.12$) was rated as horseplay to a greater extent than male assailants' behaviour ($M = 2.61$). Unexpectedly, large assailants' behaviour ($M = 3.58$) was rated as horseplay to a greater extent than small assailants' behaviour ($M = 3.15$). No other effects were significant, including interaction effects.

Table 1:
Horseplay Ratings of Assailant: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Female Assailant		Male Assailant		Female Assailant		Male Assailant	
Small Assailant (n = 22)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 21)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)
4.05 (0.90)	4.58 (1.06)	2.63 (1.00)	2.81 (1.02)	3.74 (1.12)	4.12 (0.65)	2.20 (0.75)	2.79 (1.21)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

Horseplay ratings of the victim were also analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (male victim vs. female victim) × 2 (large victim vs. small victim) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 2. There was one main effect, for sex of the victim, $F(1,155) = 95.11$, $p < 0.001$. The behaviour of female victims ($M = 4.68$) was rated as horseplay to a greater extent than the behaviour of male victims ($M = 3.15$). This is consistent with predictions that male victims would generally be rated more negatively then female victims. No other effects were significant, including interaction effects.

As predicted, a dependent t-test revealed a significant difference between horseplay ratings of assailants and victims, $t(1, 162) = 3.458$, $p < 0.001$. Victims' behaviour ($M = 3.91$) was rated as horseplay to a greater extent than assailants' behaviour ($M = 3.38$).

Table 2:
Horseplay Ratings of Victim: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Male Victim		Female Victim		Male Victim		Female Victim	
Large Victim (n = 22)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 21)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)
3.36 (1.09)	3.09 (1.42)	4.82 (0.78)	4.70 (0.99)	3.00 (0.97)	3.16 (0.90)	4.40 (0.82)	4.81 (0.63)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

Aggression Ratings

The behaviour of the assailant and the victim in each condition was rated on the following adjectives: violent, aggressive, dangerous, controlling and nasty. The mean score of these ratings made up the overall 'aggression ratings' score for the assailant and the victim in each scenario.

Ratings of the assailant were analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (female assailant vs. male assailant) × 2 (small assailant vs. large assailant) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 3. The analysis revealed two main effects, for severity of violence, $F(1,155) = 6.46$, $p < 0.05$, and sex of assailant, $F(1,155) = 80.34$, $p < 0.001$. As predicted, the behaviour of the assailant was rated as more aggressive when the violence was severe ($M = 4.86$) than when it was minor ($M = 4.45$); and the behaviour of the male assailant ($M = 5.38$) was rated as more aggressive than the behaviour of the female assailant ($M = 3.93$).

Table 3:
Aggression Ratings of Assailant: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Female Assailant		Male Assailant		Female Assailant		Male Assailant	
Small Assailant (n = 22)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 21)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)
4.59 (0.90)	3.16 (1.29)	4.73 (1.18)	5.30 (0.57)	4.03 (1.01)	3.92 (1.30)	5.68 (0.99)	5.79 (0.78)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

There was also a significant two-way interaction, between sex of assailant and size of assailant, $F(1,155) = 11.76, p < 0.01$. However, this was further qualified by a significant three-way interaction among severity of violence, sex of assailant, and size of assailant, $F(1,155) = 7.62, p < 0.01$. No other interactions were significant. The three-way interaction is displayed in Figure 2.

When simple effects analyses were conducted the simple interaction effect between sex and size of assailant remained significant for minor violence, $F(1, 78) = 19.64, p < 0.001$; but not for severe violence, $F < 1$. In most conditions, male assailants were rated as much more aggressive than female assailants. This trend was evident in all but one condition, when violence was minor, and the assailant was small. In this case, female and male assailants were perceived as similarly aggressive, with the small female assailant rated as more aggressive than females in other conditions, and the small male assailant rated as less aggressive than males other conditions. Apart from this one exception, the results supported predictions that male assailants would be rated as more aggressive than female assailants (controlling for size).

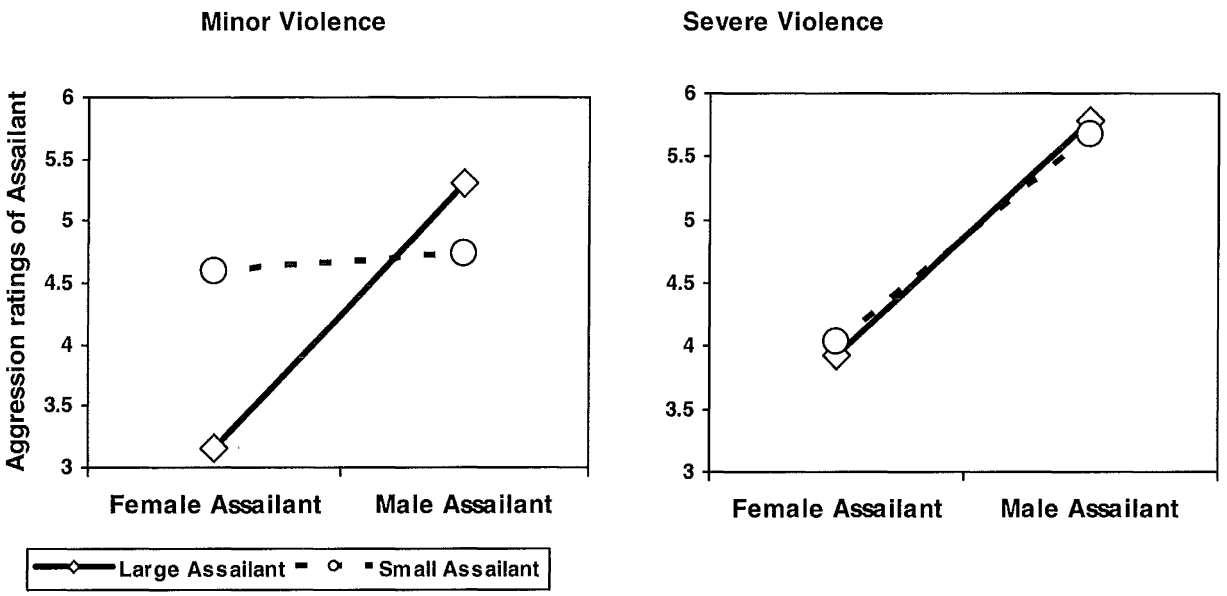

Figure 2: **Mean aggression ratings of assailant as a function of sex and size of assailant, and minor versus severe violence.**

Aggression ratings of the victim were also analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (male victim vs. female victim) × 2 (large victim vs. small victim) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 4. The analysis revealed one significant main effect, for sex of the victim, $F(1,155) = 106.17$, $p < 0.001$. Again, as predicted, the behaviour of male victims ($M = 3.93$) was rated as more aggressive overall than the behaviour of female victims ($M = 2.32$). There were however, two significant two-way interactions: between severity of violence and size of victim, $F(1,155) = 6.91$, $p < 0.01$; and between sex of victim and size of victim, $F(1,155) = 15.94$, $p < 0.001$. These interactions are displayed in Figures 3 and 4 respectively. No other interactions were significant.

Table 4:
Aggression Ratings of Victim: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Male Victim		Female Victim		Male Victim		Female Victim	
Large Victim (n = 22)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 21)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)
4.59 (0.90)	3.16 (1.29)	2.04 (0.82)	2.36 (0.80)	4.03 (1.01)	3.92 (1.30)	2.11 (0.80)	2.75 (0.90)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

Figure 3 shows that small victims were rated as *more* aggressive in severe violence than in minor violence. However, large victims were rated as *less* aggressive in severe violence than in minor violence. Because this relationship was unpredicted and was only evident on this one variable, it will not be discussed further.

Figure 3: **Mean aggression ratings of victim as a function of severity of violence and size of victim.**

Figure 4 shows that small female victims were rated as *more* aggressive than large female victims. However, small male victims were rated as *less* aggressive than large male victims. Perhaps large males and small females are seen by people as the 'typical' participants in domestically violent situations. This may be why they were rated as more aggressive than their less typical counterparts. These unexpected findings will be discussed later.

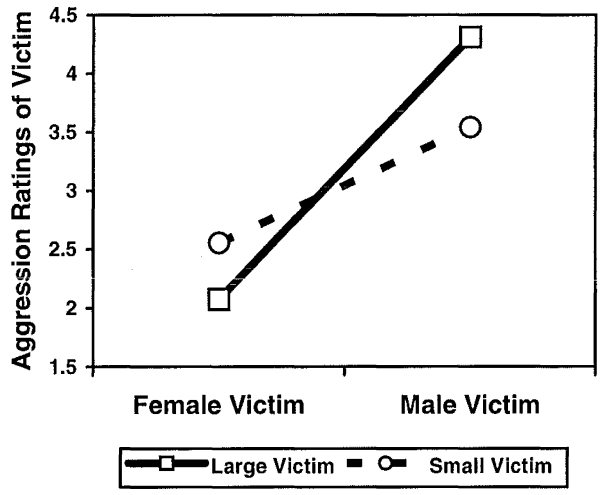

Figure 4: **Mean aggression ratings of victim as a function of sex of victim and size of victim.**

Finally, as predicted, a dependent t-test revealed a significant difference between aggression ratings of assailants and victims, $t(1, 162) = 11.01, p < 0.001$. Assailants' behaviour ($M = 4.64$) was rated as more aggressive generally than victims' behaviour ($M = 3.14$).

Blame Attributions

Participants made blame attributions to the assailant and the victim in each condition in terms of approval of actions taken, liking of the person, blame for the

incident and whether their actions were justified. The mean score of these attributions (based on reverse codings) comprised the overall 'blame attributions' to assailant and victim, with higher scores denoting more blame.

Ratings of the assailant were analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (female assailant vs. male assailant) × 2 (small assailant vs. large assailant) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 5. The analysis revealed one main effect, for sex of the assailant, $F(1,155) = 70.23, p < 0.001$. As predicted, male assailants ($M = 6.01$) were blamed more than female assailants ($M = 4.95$). There were two significant two-way interactions, between severity of violence and sex of assailant, $F(1, 155) = 6.38, p < 0.05$; and between sex of assailant and size of assailant, $F(1, 155) = 7.97, p < 0.01$. These interactions are displayed in Figures 5 and 6 and respectively. No other effects or interactions were significant.

Table 5:
Blame Attributions to Assailant: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Female Assailant		Male Assailant		Female Assailant		Male Assailant	
Small Assailant (n = 22)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 21)	Small Assailant (n = 20)	Large Assailant (n = 20)
5.38 (0.71)	4.69 (1.06)	5.55 (0.80)	5.99 (0.60)	5.04 (0.99)	4.70 (0.85)	6.26 (0.56)	6.23 (0.72)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

Figure 5 shows that female assailants were blamed slightly *less* when violence was severe compared to minor. However, male assailants were blamed much *more* when violence was severe compared to minor. This is in line with predictions that differences

in blame attributions to female and male assailants would be greater when violence was severe compared to minor.

Figure 5: **Mean blame attributions to assailant as a function of severity of violence and sex of assailant.**

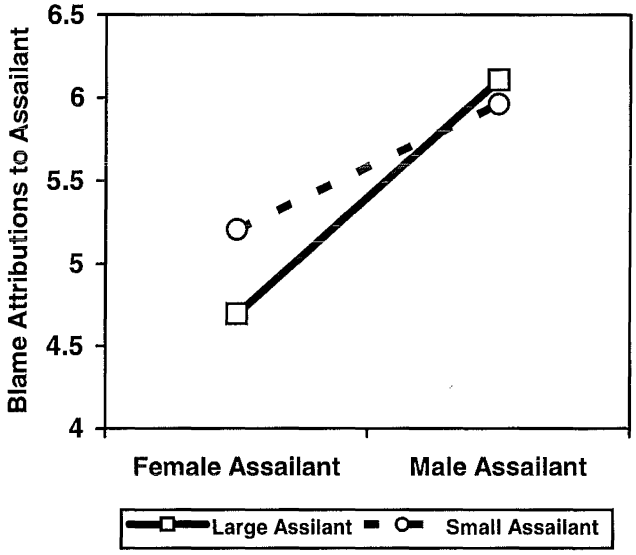

Figure 6: **Mean blame attributions to assailant as a function of sex of assailant and size of assailant.**

Figure 6 shows that large male assailants were blamed slightly *more* than small male assailants. However, large female assailants were blamed much *less* than small female assailants were. This is an unexpected finding, and will be addressed later in the discussion.

Blame attributions to the victim were also analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (male victim vs. female victim) × 2 (large victim vs. small victim) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 6. The analysis revealed one main effect, for the sex of the victim, $F(1, 155) = 5.62, p < 0.05$. As predicted, male victims ($M = 4.41$) were blamed more than female victims ($M = 4.02$). No other effects or interactions were significant.

Table 6:
Blame Attributions to Victim: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Male Victim		Female Victim		Male Victim		Female Victim	
Large Victim (n = 22)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 21)	Large Victim (n = 20)	Small Victim (n = 20)
4.40 (0.89)	4.64 (0.92)	3.55 (0.78)	4.14 (1.42)	4.21 (0.95)	4.40 (1.29)	4.20 (0.90)	4.19 (1.19)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

Finally, as predicted, a dependent t-test revealed a significant difference between blame attributions to assailants and victims, $t(1, 162) = 9.53, p < 0.001$. Assailants ($M = 5.47$) were generally blamed more than victims were ($M = 4.21$).

Negative Predictions about Relationship

Participants made predictions about the relationship in terms of whether the man should leave the woman, whether the woman should leave the man, how likely they were to break-up and how unhappy the relationship was. The mean score of these predictions made up the overall 'negative predictions about relationship' score, with higher scores denoting more negative predictions.

Table 7:
Negative Predictions about the Relationship: Means and Standard Deviations (in parentheses).

Minor Violence				Severe Violence			
Female Assailant/ Male Victim		Male Assailant/ Female Victim		Female Assailant/ Male Victim		Male Assailant/ Female Victim	
Small Assailant/ Large Victim (n = 22)	Large Assailant/ Small Victim (n = 20)	Small Assailant/ Large Victim (n = 20)	Large Assailant/ Small Victim (n = 20)	Small Assailant/ Large Victim (n = 20)	Large Assailant/ Small Victim (n = 21)	Small Assailant/ Large Victim (n = 20)	Large Assailant/ Small Victim (n = 20)
4.08 (1.00)	4.00 (1.17)	4.56 (1.06)	4.59 (1.10)	3.99 (1.27)	4.40 (1.10)	5.68 (0.94)	5.26 (1.19)

Note: On 7-point scales; n = sample size.

These data were analysed in a 2 (minor vs. severe violence) × 2 (female assailant/male victim vs. male assailant/female victim) × 2 (small assailant/large victim vs. large assailant/small victim) ANOVA. Results are displayed in Table 7. There was a main effect for the severity of violence, $F(1, 155) = 9.15, p < 0.01$; and the sex of the assailant/victim, $F(1, 155) = 27.11, p < 0.001$. As expected, relationship predictions were more negative when the violence was severe ($M = 4.83$) than when it was minor ($M = 4.30$). Relationship predictions were also more negative in the male assailant/female victim scenario ($M = 5.02$) than in the female assailant/male victim scenario ($M = 4.12$). However, these effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between severity of

violence and sex of assailant/victim, $F(1, 155) = 4.51, p < 0.05$ (see Figure 7). No other effects or interactions were statistically significant.

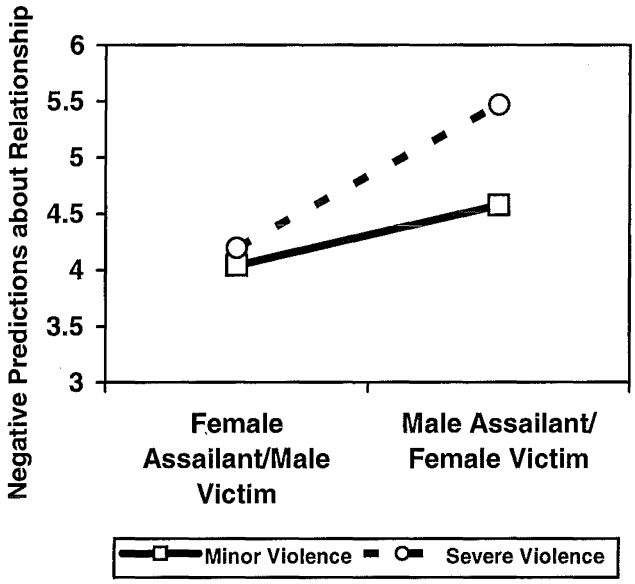

Figure 7: **Mean negative predictions about relationship as a function of severity of violence and sex of assailant/victim.**

As shown in Figure 7, when violence involved a female assailant and a male victim, predictions were similar for minor and severe violence. However, when violence involved a male assailant and a female victim, predictions were much more negative when violence was severe than when it was minor. This is in line with predictions that differences in perceptions of male and female violence would be more pronounced when violence was severe.

Individual Differences in Perceptions and Attributions

Sex of Respondent

All ANOVAs were repeated with sex of the respondent as an additional between-participants variable. There were no main effects for the sex of the respondent. Contrary to predictions and some past research, males and females did not rate any of the dependent variables differently, even before controlling for attitudes toward violence. Sex of respondent interacted with the other independent variables on some dependent variables. However, the findings were of little theoretical interest and did not influence the results already discussed. Overall, these results showed that men and women were similar in their perceptions and attributions of intimate violence.

Attitudes toward Violence

It was predicted that those with less negative attitudes toward intimate violence would rate the actors' behaviour less negatively, would blame them less, and would have less negative predictions about the relationship. The influence of attitudes toward intimate violence on perceptions and attributions of the violent scenarios was tested by using multiple regression analyses on each of the seven dependent variables. Attitudes toward violence were entered as an independent variable, along with sex of assailant/victim; size of assailant/victim; and severity of violence. Two of the analyses revealed significant results: horseplay ratings of the assailant, $t\,(1, 162) = 3.00, p < 0.01$, and blame attributions to the assailant, $t\,(1, 162) = 2.14, p < 0.05$. People with less negative attitudes toward violence rated the behaviour of the assailant as horseplay to a greater extent ($\beta = 0.19$) and attributed less blame to the assailant ($\beta = -0.15$). However,

the other five analyses did not reveal significant results. Attitudes toward intimate violence do not appear to have a substantial influence on perceptions and attributions of the violent scenarios.

Experience of Intimate Violence

Experience of intimate violence was measured using the Conflict Tactic Scale, which contains questions about the frequency of various acts of aggression in a relationship. The influence of experience of intimate violence on perceptions and attributions of the violent scenarios was tested by using multiple regression analyses on each of the seven dependent variables. Experience of violence was entered as an independent variable, along with sex of assailant/victim; size of assailant/victim; and severity of violence. Only one of the analyses revealed significant results, with aggression ratings of the assailant as the dependent variable, $t\ (1, 159) = 2.27, p < 0.05$. People with more past experience of relationship violence rated the behaviour of the assailant as more aggressive ($\beta = 0.15$) than those with less experience of relationship violence. However, the remaining six analyses did not reveal significant results. Overall, experience of relationship violence did not appear to have a strong influence on perceptions and attributions of the violent scenarios.

It was predicted that experience of relationship violence would also be related to attitudes toward violence, which would in turn predict responses to the scenarios. Experience of relationship violence and attitudes toward violence were significantly and positively correlated ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$). People with more experience of relationship violence tended to have less negative attitudes to relationship violence.

A Mediational Model?

Figure 8 shows the relationships between the individual difference variables investigated.

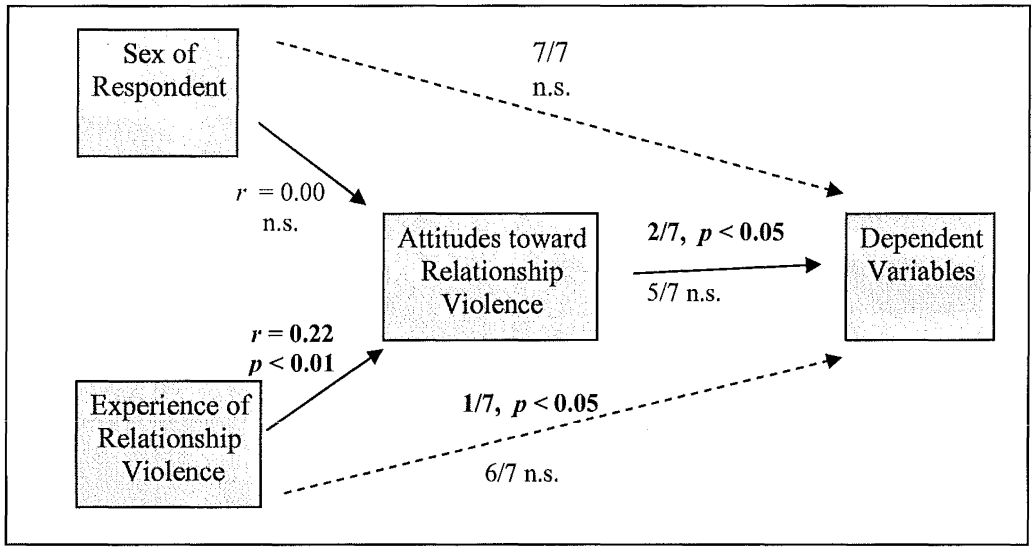

Figure 8: **A summary of mediation results with the individual difference variables.**
Note: n.s.= not statistically significant.

It was predicted that attitudes toward violence would mediate the link between sex of respondent and scores on the dependent variables. Sex of respondent did not predict responses on any of the dependent measures, and sex of respondent was not significantly correlated with attitudes toward violence. Therefore, a mediational model was not evident for this variable.

It was also predicted that attitudes toward violence would mediate the link between experience of relationship violence and responses on the dependent variables. Although experience of violence and attitudes toward violence were positively and significantly correlated, attitudes toward violence only predicted responses on two of the seven dependent variables. Therefore it was concluded that a mediational model was not

generally supported. The individual differences investigated do not appear to substantially influence perceptions and attributions of individuals in these violent scenarios.

Discussion

This research investigated whether size and strength differences between the sexes explain different attitudes toward male and female violence. Participants were shown videotaped interactions that manipulated the severity of violence and the size and the sex of assailants and victims within close relationship contexts. As predicted, assailants were perceived more negatively than victims were, and the sex of the assailant and victim clearly and consistently influenced perceptions and attributions. Assailants' behaviour was not only rated as horseplay to a lesser extent than victims' behaviour, but also as more aggressive than victims' behaviour. Assailants were also blamed more than victims. Male assailants' behaviour (compared to females') was perceived as horseplay to a lesser extent, and as aggression to a greater extent. Male assailants were also blamed more than female assailants. Male victims' behaviour (compared to females') was also perceived as horseplay to a lesser extent and as aggression to a greater extent, and they were blamed more than female victims.

Relationship predictions were also more negative when scenarios involved a male assailant and a female victim (rather than vice-versa). Unexpectedly, however, size of the assailant and the victim generally failed to directly influence participants' perceptions and attributions. Size did interact with sex to some extent, however, with the small female and large male being blamed more when they were assailants, and being rated as more aggressive when they were victims (compared to the large female and small male). As expected, severe violence was perceived more negatively than minor violence. When violence was severe (compared to minor), assailants' behaviour was rated as horseplay to

a lesser extent and as more aggressive, and relationship predictions were more negative. Severity of violence, however, failed to significantly influence perceptions of the victim.

The influence of individual differences among participants was also investigated. However, sex of the respondent, attitudes toward intimate violence in general, and past experience of intimate violence all failed to significantly influence participants' responses.

I will now discuss and explain these results in greater detail. First, I address the main findings regarding assailants versus victims, the sex and size of the assailants and victims, and the severity of violence. I then discuss the individual differences in perceptions and attributions investigated, before finally turning to the limitations and conclusions of this study.

Assailants versus Victims

Results showed that assailants were perceived more negatively than victims on all dependent variables. Past research on both male and female intimate violence has focused on *either* assailants or victims, or has often failed to report statistical tests comparing judgements of assailants and victims. However, previous research reveals that assailants are blamed more than victims, and are rated more negatively than victims (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Cook & Harris, 1995; Harris & Cook, 1994; Howard, 1984; Lane & Knowles, 2000; Stewart & Maddren, 1997; Wandrei & Rupert, 2000). Because the current research utilised videotaped scenarios, it provides support for previous research that has employed written vignettes.

There has been a concern in the intimate violence literature about 'victim blaming' (e.g., Enns, Campbell, & Courtois, 1997). The current research shows that although victims may be attributed blame for their own abuse, their assailants are blamed to a greater extent. Wandrei and Rupert (2000) claimed that their finding that assailants were blamed more than victims was attributable to the ability of the psychologists who participated in their study to 'transcend, to a great extent, the violence myth that victims do something to "deserve" abuse' (p. 277). The students in the current research also appear able to 'rise above' such a myth. However, it makes intuitive sense that the active person inflicting violence is seen more negatively than the passive recipient. Perhaps the myth of 'victim blaming' is breaking down or does not play an important role in perceptions of victims *compared to* assailants. These possibilities merit further research.

Sex and Size of Assailant and Victim

The sex of the assailant significantly and consistently influenced participants' responses to the videotaped violent scenarios, along predicted lines. These findings support anecdotal observations that female violence is perceived as humorous and entertaining, whereas male violence is perceived as serious and disturbing. The results also support numerous previous studies that have utilised written vignettes of violent scenarios, which have found similar results (Arias & Johnson, 1989; Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Carlson, 1999; Feather, 1996; Harris & Cook, 1994).

The sex of the victim also significantly and consistently influenced participants' perceptions of the violent scenarios, along the same lines as for the sex of the assailant. These findings are also consistent with other research utilising written vignettes (Bethke

& DeJoy, 1993; Carlson, 1999; Harris & Cook, 1994; Lehmann & Santilli, 1996) which have found that male victims are generally perceived more negatively than female victims.

Results also supported expectations that male violence would be perceived as having more serious implications for the relationship than female violence. Participants thought the couple's relationship *should* and *would* break up, and that they were unhappy to a greater extent when the scenario involved a male assailant and a female victim, rather than a female assailant and a male victim.

This research used videotaped incidents rather than written vignettes as past research has done. Again, the similarity of these findings with previous research supports the contention that male violence is viewed more negatively (using many different measures) than female violence is. As argued in the introduction, one factor that may account for these results is the relative size and strength of males and females in general. Men tend to be more capable of inflicting injury than women, due to their generally larger physical size.

However, overall, the relative size of the actors failed to independently influence participants' responses on the dependent variables, for both assailants and victims. On the other hand, size interacted with sex of the assailant and victim on some measures. The small female and large male were blamed more when they were assailants and were seen as more aggressive when they were victims (compared to the large female and small male respectively). How can these findings be explained? One possibility involves media campaigns which have focused on male to female domestic violence, where the man is typically large and the female small. As the result of such campaigns, people may see

large males and small females as the more typical couple, and as the more typical participants in domestically violent situations. However, as the interaction between sex and size was not uniform or consistent (it was only evident in two out of seven variables) this conclusion is tentative. Crucially, size differences between the sexes did not appear to account for the well-replicated finding that male violence is judged more negatively than female violence. There are several possible explanations for these differences in perceptions, besides the relative size of men and women.

First, men are more likely to cause injury when carrying out the same physical act as women. This is a common explanation used to explain why male violence is viewed more negatively than female violence. This research attempted to limit the influence of assumptions about injury levels by using videotaped scenarios rather than written vignettes. There were no obvious physical injuries evident in these videotaped incidents. Nevertheless, participants still may have assumed that there were differences between the male and female victims in terms of injuries. For example, participants may have assumed that female victims would be more likely to develop bruising than male victims. However, it is difficult to control for these sorts of judgements. Male violence is probably seen as more physically harmful than female violence, even when no clear physical injuries are evident.

Second, dominant gender stereotypes probably influenced responses to the violent scenarios used in this research. Stereotypes powerfully influence judgements of individuals and groups in critical ways (Smith & Mackie, 2000). Men tend to be seen as assertive, aggressive and controlling whereas women tend to be seen as more accommodating, passive and submissive. Male aggression is seen as more typical of

males' dispositions and is therefore seen as requiring control (Koski & Mangold, 1998). However, when females behave violently, people often assume that there must be a 'good reason' for such behaviour, as it (probably) does not come naturally. Male victims are perhaps perceived more negatively because they are seen as 'wimps' who cannot control their partners. Female victims, however, are more commonly seen as helpless and vulnerable at the hands of their violent partners. The influence of these general gender stereotypes may account for my findings.

Third, stereotypes concerning intimate violence were probably also influential. Prototypical domestic violence exemplars in the media tend to involve solely male to female violence. Consequently, this form of relationship violence is the image invoked when the term 'domestic violence' is used. Men have come to be seen as the typical assailant and women as the typical victim in domestic disputes (Harris & Cook, 1994). This may have led to participants dismissing female intimate violence as inconsequential while regarding male violence more seriously.

These stereotypes of intimate relationship violence probably originate (at least) partly from media and public awareness campaigns that have focused upon male to female violence since the 1970's. Research has shown that media content tends to increase viewers' acceptance of gender stereotypes (Herret-Skjellum & Allen, 1996). While male intimate violence is highly visible and officially discouraged, there is a marked absence of efforts to condemn female violence (Straus, Kaufman-Kantor, & Moore, 1997). For example, television advertisements against domestic violence always involve a male assailant and a female victim. However, the prevalence of male and female intimate violence is roughly equivalent (Archer, 2000). Given that all forms of

intimate violence should be discouraged, media campaigns could focus on many different forms of intimate violence (including female to male violence), and in doing so reduce stereotypes relating to the 'appropriate' assailants and victims of intimate violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1977).

Further research needs to investigate the roles of injury levels, gender stereotypes, and intimate violence stereotypes in explaining perceptions of intimate violence. Size of the assailant versus the victim did not appear to exert a strong moderating influence on perceptions of intimate violent scenarios in this research. However, this finding needs replication.

Severity of Violence

The severity of the violence independently influenced responses concerning assailants' behaviour and predictions about the couples' relationship. These findings support and extend previous research utilising written vignettes (e.g. Arias & Johnson, 1989; Carlson, 1999; Miller & Bukva, 2001; Wandrei & Rupert, 2000) and highlight the need for relevant research to take into account the severity of the violent episode. Arais and Johnson (1989) have argued that differences in perceptions of minor and severe violence are problematic for several reasons. First, people may be less likely to report minor violence, which may increase the probability of recurrence. Second, minor forms of violence may escalate into more severe forms. Finally, the effects of minor violence may be more damaging for individuals and relationships than is commonly believed. Therefore, both minor and severe forms of violence should be targeted in any interventions aimed at ameliorating intimate violence.

However, the severity of the violence did not significantly influence perceptions of victims in this study. This finding makes sense, because the victim behaved identically in both minor and severe conditions. The extent of the violence inflicted upon victims does not appear to influence perceptions about them.

Severity of violence also interacted with the sex of the assailant on blame attributions (to the assailant) and relationship predictions. These interactions were in line with expectations that the main effects would be larger when violence was severe. However, these variables interacted significantly on only two out of seven measures. Thus, there was only limited support for the proposition that male violence is judged particularly negatively compared to female violence when violence is severe.

Individual Differences in Perceptions and Attributions

Men and women were similar in their responses to the violent videos, although prior research has produced mixed findings (Arias & Johnson, 1996; Bethke & DeJoy, 1993; Beyers et al., 2000; Carlson, 1999; Cook & Harris, 1995; Feather, 1996; Harris, 1991; Harris & Cook, 1994; Stewart & Maddren, 1997). Contrary to other research, sex of respondent was also unrelated to general attitudes toward relationship violence (Funk et al., 1999; Harris & Cook, 1994; MacIntyre & Cantrell, 1995; Smith et al., 2001).

Experience of relationship violence did not substantially influence responses to the violent videos used in this research. However, those with more experience of relationship violence (as a victim or an assailant) had less negative *general* attitudes toward intimate violence. This is consistent with previous research (Cate et al., 1982; Funk et al., 1999). Thus, although experience of violence did not seem to influence

perceptions of specific violent incidents, it did influence more general beliefs about violence in intimate relationships. Surprisingly, general attitudes toward relationship violence did not predict responses to the violent videos.

Limitations

Sex of the assailant and sex of the victim were confounded in this research. The videotapes contained both male and female assailants, and both male and female victims. However, out of necessity, the couple always contained a male and a female. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether the effects were the result of the assailants' sex or the victims' sex in the couple. For example, female assailants may have been rated less negatively because they were hitting a male (who may be seen as able to easily defend himself) rather than because they were female per se. Similarly, male assailants may have been rated more negatively because they were hitting a female (who is seen as more vulnerable), rather than specifically because they were male. Further research looking at both heterosexual and homosexual relationships could vary the sex of the assailant and the victim in each condition, thereby dealing with this problem. However, other research has produced similar findings to the current research, with male assailants judged more negatively, regardless of the sex of the victim, and female victims judged less negatively, also regardless of the sex of the assailant (Carlson, 1999).

This research improves on other designs in that it utilised videotaped scenarios rather than relying on written vignettes. This allowed us to control possible moderating variables such as the size of the actors and the levels of injury. However, the participants

still watched scripted videotaped scenarios rather than real-life events. I suspect that my findings would be even stronger if real-life intimate violence was observed.

The use of videotaped scenarios also has other disadvantages. The research relied to a great extent on the ability of the actors to realistically depict violent incidents. Many participants responded to the videos with amusement, indicating that they were perhaps not believable as actual incidents of violence in real relationships. However, laughter can be an outcome of stress. Students watching Milgram's (1963) obedience studies frequently giggle or laugh (as did many participants in Milgram's study). Therefore the participants' laughter could have been due to stress rather than the unrealistic videos. Moreover, this research relied on between-group comparisons; thus, participants only watched one scenario. Consequently, the results I obtained should not have been unduly influenced by the credibility of the videotapes.

The differences in size between the actors may not have been noticed by the participants. The actors were different an average of 22.5 kg in weight and 12.5 cm in height. These differences seem to be obvious in the videotapes. However, I did not conduct manipulation checks to test whether participants saw the 'large' and 'small' actors as I intended. Very big and tall women could have been paired with very small men, but this strategy may have produced size differences that look decidedly odd, atypical, or humorous to observers.

Finally, the sample of participants was rather homogenous, and not particularly representative of the general population of New Zealand, being predominantly composed of young, white, university students. This limits the generalisability of the findings. However, past research has found that students tend to hold fewer stereotypes regarding

intimate violence than the general population (Aubrey & Ewing, 1989). Therefore, I would expect the results to be even stronger using community-based samples, because of the influence of gender and intimate violence stereotypes.

Conclusion

Research investigating perceptions and attributions of violent scenarios has consistently found that male violence is viewed more negatively than female violence. This is the first study to systematically investigate whether size and strength differences between the sexes might explain this well replicated finding. Size of the assailant versus the victim did not account for the different attitudes toward male and female violence. Moreover, sex seemed much more important than size in determining the perceptions of the observers. Gender stereotypes seem to be alive and well in determining how observers perceive violent episodes of intimate violence.

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